

Stimulus funds could boost two South Florida highway

By Alfonso Chardy

In South Florida, federal stimulus dollars may soon be flowing through two major highway projects that could benefit commuters in the long run and unemployed construction workers in the short run.

At least that's the hope of local officials who have steered the two projects -- one in north Broward and the other in Northwest Miami-Dade -- to the top of the list for funding under the Obama administration's \$787 billion stimulus package.

The two projects represent roughly half of the estimated \$331 million in federal stimulus transportation money for South Florida.

In Broward, a \$37 million four-lane flyover could generate hundreds of jobs and add a missing piece to Dixie Highway, which narrows to two lanes and then abruptly ends just north of Hillsboro Boulevard -- near the spot where the overpass would rise.

In Miami-Dade, a \$119.5 million segment of an elevated highway for trucks could generate thousands of jobs and thin congestion on Northwest 25th Street west of the Palmetto Expressway -- an area clogged with trucks hauling cargo from Miami International Airport.

Members of transportation planning boards, known as Metropolitan Planning Organizations, in each county recommended that the balance of South Florida stimulus allocations -- about \$175 million -- go to transit and municipal projects including bridge and road repair.

Key transit projects recommended include bus shelters in Broward and advancement in Miami-Dade of a long-planned extension of Metrorail to MIA.

While construction of any project is uncertain until the state Legislature approves the budget, projects recommended by the planning boards reflect the wishes of elected officials including mayors, city and county commissioners.

When they met in separate special sessions Feb. 20 in Fort Lauderdale and Miami, board members largely agreed to recommend that stimulus money go to select major projects rather than many small ones sought by cities, towns and villages.

For example, Fort Lauderdale sought money for bridges. But in a compromise the Broward Metropolitan Planning Organization assigned the bulk of its \$40 million for highways and bridges to the flyover and bus shelters. The Florida Department of Transportation estimates that the flyover would cost about \$37 million.

It would rise from just south of Hillsboro Boulevard and run north over Northeast Second Street and railroad tracks near the Hillsboro Canal, coming down just north of the Broward-Palm Beach County line.

Nadir Rodrigues, project manager for the Florida Department of Transportation, said the flyover will correct a Dixie Highway alignment problem at that location.

When drivers on Dixie Highway reach the intersection of Northeast Second Street they have to stop because the road abruptly ends -- both southbound and northbound. Drivers then have to zig-zag to rejoin the unconnected sections of Dixie Highway.

"Dixie Highway is a constrained facility between Hillsboro Boulevard and the Hillsboro Canal," said Rodrigues.

The area in Deerfield Beach where the flyover will be built is economically distressed, and city officials believe the overpass will draw commuters from Boca Raton to businesses on and around Hillsboro Boulevard.

"We thank you for bringing us back to life," Mayor Sylvia Poitier of Deerfield Beach told county and city commissioners when they voted for the flyover Feb. 20. "It's a project that will revive that stretch of the road. It's not an isolated road, but a major highway."

In Miami-Dade, the idea is to ease chronic congestion on Northwest 25th Street where trucks and passenger vehicles compete for the road every day. Trucks use the east-west road to haul cargo from MIA to either the Palmetto Expressway or Doral warehouses.

In 2007, the Florida Department of Transportation began building the elevated roadway for trucks above Northwest 25th Street between MIA's cargo area and the Palmetto. Workers are now erecting massive support pillars for the road on the north side of Northwest 25th Street.

The truck viaduct segment now under construction is scheduled to open in 2011 at a cost estimated at \$117 million.

At their Feb. 20 meeting, Miami-Dade transportation board members were told that the planned stretch of the viaduct from the Palmetto to Doral was unfunded. As a result, they voted to recommend that the state transportation agency spend the bulk of its \$126 million in stimulus money on extending the viaduct to Doral.

Gus Pego, the agency's district chief in Miami, told Sally Heyman, a Miami-Dade County Commissioner and planning board member, that it would take about three years to complete the extension.

"It's good for the airport and it's good for the community," Pego said.

After the meeting, Pego said he could not predict if the Doral phase of the viaduct will be built even after board members voted for the project. The reasons: Allocation of the \$126 million in stimulus money is at the discretion of the state transportation agency and the agency must wait until the state Legislature includes the money in an approved budget.

When Vice President Joe Biden visited Miami last week to promote transportation stimulus money, Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez went up to U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, who was with Biden, and asked for federal help to finish the viaduct.

Miami-Dade transportation board members also voted to allocate the bulk of \$76 million in transit stimulus money to advance a plan to extend Metrorail from the Earlington Heights station along the Airport Expressway to the Miami Intermodal Center -- a transit and rental car hub being built just east of MIA.

Biden visited the hub's construction site Thursday, accompanied by LaHood, Miami Mayor Manny Diaz, Miami-Dade Mayor Alvarez and state transportation officials.

The county ultimately may be unable to use stimulus money for the extension because of "technical issues," but officials believe the project will eventually go forward. Cost is now estimated at \$426.5 million, according to a document given Feb. 20 to Miami-Dade Metropolitan Planning Organization members.